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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA STUMBLES ON REGIONAL LEGISLATION

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: United Russia is far from united on the direct election of mayors. United Russia Duma members introduced legislation to eliminate the direct election of mayors, in what may have been a misguided attempt to implement Putin's call to transfer more authority to the regions. Predictable public opposition surfaced, and the Kremlin has distanced itself from the proposal. That said, the legislation is not dead and bears watching. END SUMMARY

12. (U) On October 31, three United Russia Duma Deputies announced that they were introducing legislation that would effectively change mayors of provincial capitals from elected to appointed officials. The legislation was drafted by the Chairman of the Local Government Committee, Vladimir Mokriy, who insisted that this legislation actually promoted democracy because it would make mayors more accountable. "Currently, mayors often attempt to stifle criticism by simply saying, 'I was elected and may do what I please.' This new legislation will make mayors accountable, because they will now know that they can be replaced if they do not take care of their people." The proposal drew harsh criticism from the media, and the legislation was pulled back by the committee the day before it was to be introduced. Mokriy gave no explanation for the delay, and the spokesman for United Russia's Duma faction said only that they wished to consult with the mayors before proceeding.

United Russia Changes Course on Appointing Mayors

13. (U) At the Russian Local Self-Government Council held in Moscow on November 13-15, United Russia Chairman Boris Gryzlov opposed the elimination of mayoral elections. He did not completely dismiss the legislation, however, saying that it had been introduced by "respectable deputies" and merited serious consideration.

14. (C) Gryzlov spoke about the pressing need for regional reform, because the success of national priority projects in health care and education was dependent upon successful local implementation. He cited poor municipal statistics, which make it difficult either to gauge local needs or to measure the government's success in addressing them. Gryzlov also said that there were too many federal employees at the local level and that resources should be transferred from the federal budget to local budgets, while the number of federal employees in the regions should be cut. The draft legislation reportedly contains provisions to reduce the number of federal employees working on the regional level. Leonid Goryainov, Head of United Russia's Information Directorate, told us on November 15 that the legislation was a work in progress, and that United Russia's goal was to implement President Putin's directive to transfer more power to the regions. He said that this topic and the legislation will be discussed at length at the United Russia party conference in

Yekaterinburg on December 2.

Kremlin Opposed to Mayoral Appointments

15. (U) Presidential Assistant Igor Shuvalov, speaking to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (coincidentally also held in Moscow during the week of November 13), publicly embarrassed the Governor of Altay Kray while expressing the Kremlin's opposition to the legislation. Shuvalov quizzed Governor Karlin via video link in front of the congress, asking him if appointed mayors would be a good thing for Russia. Karlin (apparently not knowing the "right" answer) said "if given the opportunity, I would make good use of it." Shuvalov then rebuked him, saying that regional authority should be "balanced" and not a "top-down construction like the army."

Echoes from Samara

16. (C) According to Public Chamber member Vyachislav Glazychev, an expert on regional politics, United Russia's opposition to this legislation has much less to do with preserving local democracy than it does with avoiding uncontrollable groundswells of public discontent. He noted that this summer in Samara, the city council attempted to pass a new city charter that would have eliminated the direct election of the mayor by making him appointed by the council. The public responded with protests and a petition drive that collected more than 420,000 signatures. "Money can't buy that," said Glazychev "Maybe you could buy 20,000 signatures,

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but nearly half a million people means that they had tapped into a live wire of public emotion, and that scares them. And if it could happen in Samara, it could certainly happen in Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, and Nizhniy Novgorod."

17. (U) The mayors at the Russian Local Self-Government Council were either United Russia members or unaffiliated with any party. According to Glazychev, they were very concerned that their fate would be the same as Samara Mayor Georgiy Limanskiy who, ironically, was voted out of office by the same groundswell that he had used to fight his city council. While worried about losing their jobs, they were also concerned that United Russia was weakening its support among the people just when it needed to compete with the new "A Just Russia" party. Yekaterinburg Mayor Arkadiy Chernetskiy, who will play host to the United Russia conference in December, told the press that trying to eliminate mayoral elections would lead to great losses at the polls for United Russia.

United Russia's Misstep Explained

18. (C) Goryainov explained away the public dispute as a natural by-product of democracy. This was not really a dispute over the ends, but simply a difference of opinion on methods. "On the whole, United Russia supports the legislation; there are only small parts that are objectionable." Glazychev explained it differently: "United Russia is not really a party. It is too big, and too loose a structure. And now, because they are not the only party with a direct link to the Kremlin, they must naturally occasionally be out of step." Glazychev dismissed Gryzlov's purported aim of eliminating large numbers of federal bureaucrats from regional centers as "rhetoric," noting that since I was young boy, under Stalin, the Kremlin has been calling for reducing the numbers of bureaucrats. And every year, the number increases."

Comment

[19](#). (C) Clearly, the introduction of this legislation was not well-coordinated or thought through within United Russia prior to Mokriy's October 31 news conference. The party, possibly reacting to the sting of its first electoral loss -- the Samara mayoral race -- rushed legislation that would prevent a recurrence. The Kremlin then used that miscue to distance itself from an unpopular measure, and in the process, bolstered the second Kremlin-sponsored party "A Just Russia." The bill to eliminate the direct election of mayors, however, is not dead and bears watching.
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